ELL Reader

Social Studies

Social Studies

Genre	Build Background	Access Content	Extend Language
Realistic Fiction	• Cultures • U.S. Immigration • Geography • Adaptation	• Map • Labels and Captions • Definitions	• Rhyming Words

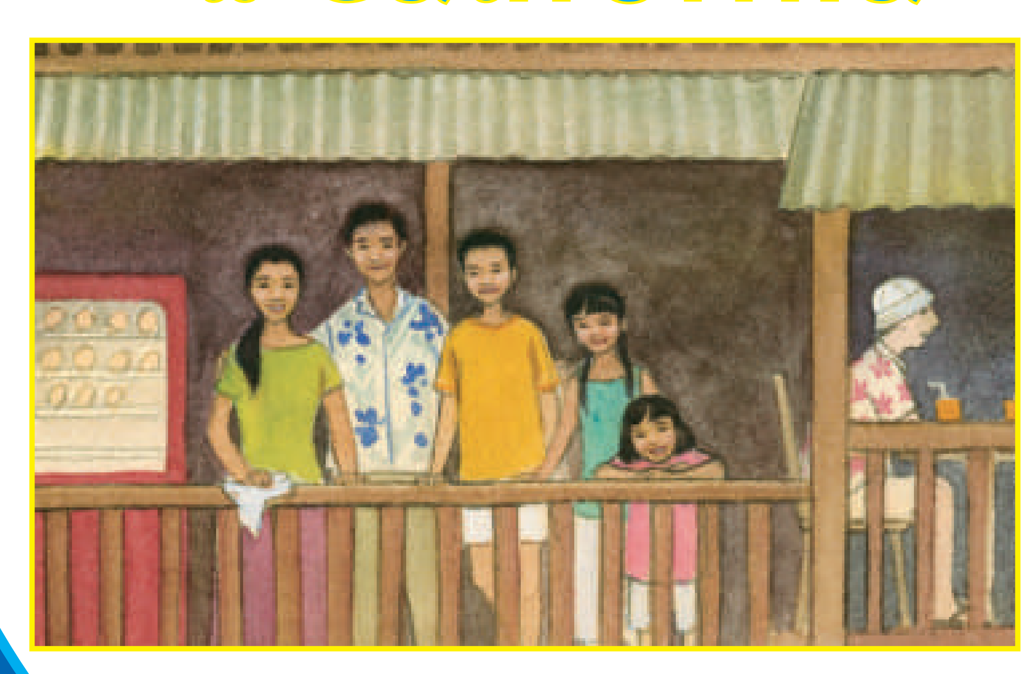
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From Thailand to California



by Somchit Dundee
Illustrated by Julie Kim

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August 16
Koh Lanta, Thailand

My name is Nongnoot. I live with my family on the little island of Koh Lanta Yai in Thailand. My parents own a café in Old Lanta Town. I have an older sister, Peeoye, and an older brother, Crew.

Tomorrow, everything will change. I will leave for America! Aunt Melee and Uncle Somchai are emigrating to California. They will have hard jobs, so they will need help with their little girl, Somying. I am going to live with them for a while and help them. I speak English well, and I like to take care of my little cousin. Somying is only four years old!

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emigrating: leaving their home to go live in another country

Once, at my family's café, a tourist showed me her picture journal. It was filled with words and pictures about her trip. It was wonderful! I have decided to create a picture journal of my own. I want to remember Koh Lanta Yai, so I am beginning it with pictures of my island.

My Aunt Melee and Uncle Somchai live in Bangkok, the capital of Thailand. Before I can fly with them to the United States, I must go to Bangkok. My big brother Crew will go with me. We will take a ferryboat, a bus, and then a train. Finally, we will arrive in Bangkok.

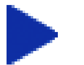


Mae (my mother), Paw (my father), Crew, Peeoye, and me, Nongnoot, in front of my family's café in Old Lanta Town

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tourist: person on a trip for fun

ferryboat: a boat to move people, cars, and bikes across a narrow body of water





August 18
Bangkok, Thailand

I have been to Bangkok before, but I forgot how busy it is. There are cars and motorbikes and tuk-tuks (tiny taxis) everywhere. There are so many things to buy on the streets!

Tonight, we all went to a fancy restaurant and watched beautiful dancers. In the restaurant, everyone eats at tables. Tourists do that in Koh Lanta. I am not sure I like eating at a table. I like to eat on the floor, as I do at home. I wonder if we will eat at a table in the United States.

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motorbikes: small motorcycles that are easy to ride



Dancers of Thailand



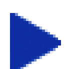
August 23
San José, California

We flew on a plane from Bangkok to California. It was a very long trip. Finally, we arrived in San José, California.

Our apartment is in the middle of the city. The building is very tall. Our front door does not open to a street or to the sea. It opens to a long hall inside the building.

We go for walks every day. The streets here are busy, as they are in Bangkok. But people don't ride motorbikes or ride in tuk-tuks. They drive cars and trucks.

Some people walk in the city, but they do not stop and talk. People smile only if you smile at them. They always seem to be in a hurry. There are not many food stands along the road as there are in Koh Lanta. If you want to eat, you have to go into a restaurant or eat at home.



Food is very different in San José and Thailand.



Food markets in San José look like this.

September 4
San José, California

Today I started school in San José. I had to speak English all day. Everything is written in English—the signs, the books, and the directions on the board. Speaking English all day was hard, so I made some mistakes. I left some words out of my sentences. I think I used some words wrong too.

At lunch, no one goes home to eat fresh food. Everyone eats at school in the cafeteria or eats food from brown paper bags. The food is not very spicy. I sat at a table to eat. Only one girl smiled at me. Life is very serious here, almost like going into battle.

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very serious: not carefree or relaxed

October 16
San José, California

After Aunt Melee picks me up from school each day, we buy food for dinner. At first, we could not find food for Thai cooking. There are no outdoor markets. Some of the big stores, called supermarkets, do not have fish paste, only shiny fruit and boxes of prepared meals. Finally, we found an Asian market in the city.

When we get home, Aunt Melee works at her computer. I play with Somying. After Aunt Melee finishes work, we cook dinner together. We cook vegetables in a big wok, just as we did at home. I am proud to help with dinner.

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wok: special pan used in east Asian cooking




November 11
San José, California

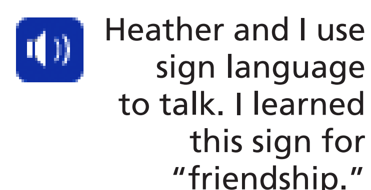
My favorite class is language arts, even though we read a lot. Miss Smith lets us work in groups, the way we did in my Thai school.

Today, I made friends with a quiet girl. Her name is Heather. She is in my group. Heather is quiet because she is deaf. We are learning to understand each other. She is teaching me sign language. We talk with our hands.

Miss Smith asked us to paint something from nature and write a poem about it. What could I paint? I do not see nature in the city.

Heather said she would help. She invited me to go to her favorite place with her and her mother tomorrow. It is called the Japanese Friendship Garden.

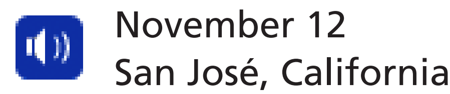
But I am also scared about writing a poem. I don't think I can rhyme words in English!



Heather and I use sign language to talk. I learned this sign for "friendship."



rhyme: make the last words of lines sound the same



November 12
San José, California

San José is pretty and clean. But I miss having nature all around me, as in Koh Lanta. I miss the animals that wander free on my island. I miss the fish and the smell of the water. I even miss the constant rain and soft clouds.

The Japanese Friendship Garden is right in the middle of San José. I did not know there was such a beautiful place in San José! Soft clouds float above the trees. Ponds full of colorful fish glint in the sunlight. Birds sing in the bushes. Pretty shrines sit beside green ponds.

The green garden reminds me of Koh Lanta. I used sign language to tell Heather about my home. I hope she understood some of what I said. I want my friend to know that part of me.





I see a resemblance between my island and this garden. They are both peaceful.

shrines: places of honor or respect



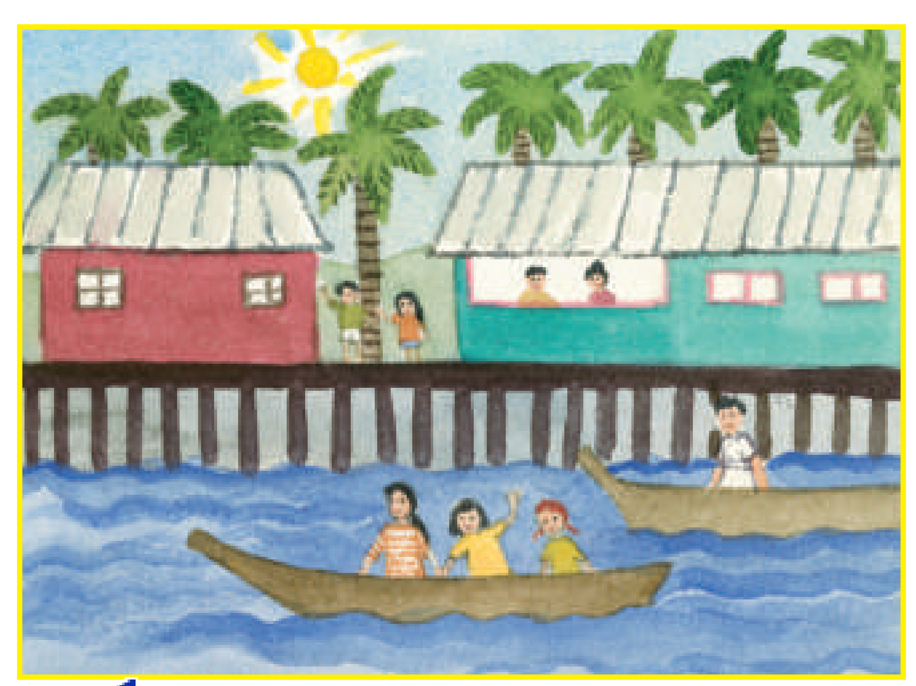
November 14
San José, California

Today did not start out well. In language arts, we all had to show our artwork and read our poems. Miss Smith liked my painting of the Friendship Garden. She said it was one of the best in the class. But I did not have a poem. I could not find words to rhyme.

Near the end of class, Heather showed a watercolor painting. It was not of the Japanese Friendship Garden at all. It was of my island, and it was perfect! I could have stepped right through the colors of her painting and into Koh Lanta.

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watercolor painting: a painting in which the paint is mixed with water





Miss Smith saw the look of surprise on my face. She asked me why I was smiling. A flood of words came out of my mouth. Some were not perfect English sentences because I was so excited. "My little island. Koh Lanta, Koh Lanta Yai, beside the sea, boats float, houses dancing on stilts in the waving sea, laughing, my friends come to say hello…" and on and on I went.

Miss Smith said, "Stop. Say that all again."

I was embarrassed. I thought Miss Smith wanted me to correct my English.

"No," said Miss Smith. "You have created a poem. I want to write it down."

"A poem?" I asked.

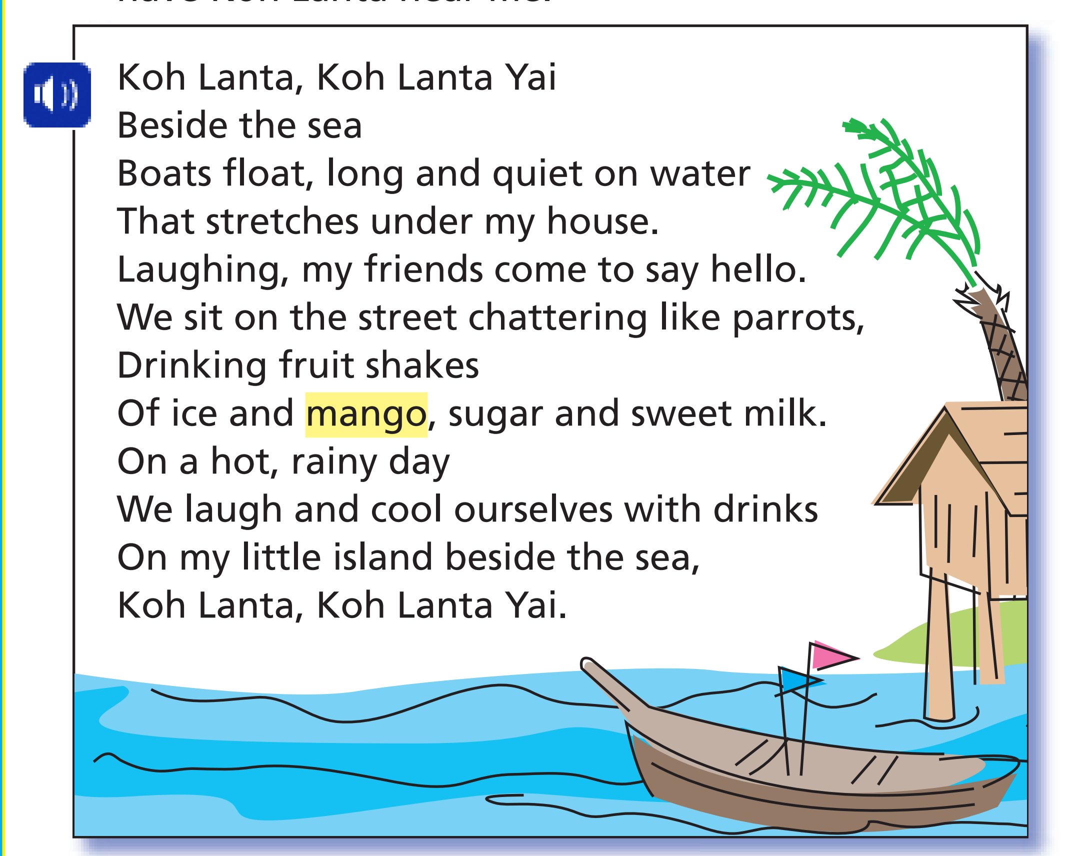
"Yes," said Miss Smith. "Poems do not always need to rhyme. Your poem is beautiful."

I smiled. Then I did my best to repeat my words. Miss Smith wrote it down as quickly as she could.

November 18
San José, California

Today, our art and poems were on the walls of our room. My poem was beside Heather's painting.

After school, I could not stop writing poetry! Now, I can put three kinds of pictures in my photo journal. I can put pictures from a camera, pictures that I draw, and word pictures from my pen. My word pictures are my poetry. As I write them, I feel close to Koh Lanta Yai. I will always have Koh Lanta near me.



Koh Lanta, Koh Lanta Yai
Beside the sea
Boats float, long and quiet on water
That stretches under my house.
Laughing, my friends come to say hello.
We sit on the street chattering like parrots,
Drinking fruit shakes
Of ice and mango, sugar and sweet milk.
On a hot, rainy day
We laugh and cool ourselves with drinks
On my little island beside the sea,
Koh Lanta, Koh Lanta Yai.

mango: a sweet fruit

Talk About It

1. What was hard about Nongnoot's move to California?
2. How does Nongnoot feel at the end of the story? Why does she feel that way?

Write About It

3. This story has two settings: Koh Lanta and San José. Compare and contrast these places on a chart like this. Make your chart on a separate paper.

Koh Lanta	San José
small houses on posts	tall apartment buildings
food sold on streets	food sold in big stores

Extend Language

When words rhyme, the ends of the words sound the same. *Fish, dish,* and *wish* rhyme. What words rhyme with each of these words?

small back fly cart brother

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